

Wagner proposes 'radical' change in building schools

By Adam Huber

For the Dover Post

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In an ongoing campaign to build support for "radically" changing the way public schools are built in Delaware, State Auditor Tom Wagner spoke to the Georgetown-Millsboro Rotary Club.

Using uniform designs and standard climate control systems, Wagner said, the state could reduce the cost of building new schools by 25% or more. As a result, he said the state, which pays up to 80% of construction costs, could focus on building more schools, reducing class size and implementing full-time kindergarten programs.

The problem, as he sees it, is that architects are currently paid 10% of the final construction costs for designing a new school, something that only encourages unneeded "bells and whistles."

"We're going to be building tons and tons of schools throughout Delaware in the next 10 years," Wagner told Rotary members gathered at Sussex Pine's Country Club for a luncheon on April 11. "There is already \$200 million worth of school construction on the books."

"We owe it to the taxpayers to build in the most economic way possible."

According to Wagner, using only a handful of architects and design plans for what he called "model schools," the state, which would take over control of the construction process under his plan, could also save additional money with standard heating and air conditioning systems.

The model schools would be built for safety and future expansion, he said, as well as for reducing maintenance costs.

Although Wagner feels state control would be the most cost effective way of constructing public schools, he realizes there will be opposition. Even with legislators and labor unions onboard, there are those who could contest the idea.

"Architects and designers may not be happy, but frankly, that's not my concern," he said. "My concern is to build better schools at a reduced price."

Those in the private sector may not be the only ones expressing concern, though.

"Historically, school districts have been opposed because they feel it's a loss of local control," Wagner said. "But the state is paying 60 to 80 percent of the costs, and if I'm paying that I would want somehow to control costs."

While he has not set a timeline for implementing his proposed changes, Wagner said legislators and labor unions have been supportive of his ideas, adding he would continue to try and build public support before introducing anything official.

(Adam Huber is a reporter at the Sussex Countian in Georgetown, a sister paper of the Dover Post.)